

**INFORMAL MEMORANDUM IN RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS ON INDONESIA**

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A. Some Notes on the Relationship of Malaya and Sumatra

A survey of the ethnic, religious, cultural, and even economic factors might suggest the possibility of a closer association between Sumatra and Malaya than would in fact appear likely on political and emotional grounds. The common characteristics of Malays and Sumatrans reflect in part the fact that the Straits of Malacca are only about 60 to 100 miles across, narrow enough to invite peoples to migrate and governments to seek control of both shores. A modern history of separate colonial experience has left the Malays and the Sumatrans with a remarkable different memory of their earlier common history. It would be unwise to exaggerate the similarities between these two peoples because their differences are greater than, say, those between Canadians and Americans or between Australians and New Zealanders.

With respect to the geographic relationship between Malaya and Sumatra it should be noted that throughout modern history all significant sea powers have sought to prevent any single power from gaining control of both shores of the Straits of Malacca. The idea of a union of Malaya and Sumatra has been repugnant to all sea powers, for even a relatively weak government straddling the Straits would have substantial advantages.

## **B. Historical Associations**

Although the earliest migrations of people into Malaya came from the mainland of Southeast Asia, the modern Malayan is generally viewed as having migrated originally from Sumatra and Java, back to the peninsula. The largest movements of people from Sumatra came from Palembang and from the Minangkabau areas. These early migrations from Sumatra were extremely important in shaping the early history of the Malayan culture. At the time when Palembang was the center of the Sri Vijaya empire there was a loose political relationship that encompassed Malaya, and Palembang itself was often referred to as the "Malaya" country. Although in their customs and habits of life the people of Negri Sembilan still seem quite close to the Central Sumatrans, they seem to have little conscious sense of identity with Sumatrans. Indeed, the feeling of the Negri Sembilan for Sumatra is not like that of, say, the American toward England, but is more like that of the modern Armenian toward Greece. He may at best know that he has some historical ties but they hardly seem relevant to his attitudes toward his present day world.

The peoples of Negri Sembilan were, however, reminded of their earlier ties with Sumatra when a member of the Sumatran aristocracy was invited to assume the position of Yang-di-Pertuan and then established the house of the current ruling family. This did not strengthen greatly any sense of association between Sumatra and Malaya. The fact that the ruler of Negri Sembilan is now serving as the first Chief of State, or Yang-di-Pertuan Agong, of the newly independent Malaya should not suggest any strengthening of ties between Malaya and Sumatra.

First the Portuguese and later the Dutch dominated both shores of the Straits, making it possible for extensive movements of peoples to take place between Malaya and Sumatra. For example, shortly after the decline of Portuguese power, the Achinese from the Western tip of Sumatra engaged in extensive raiding operations that carried them across much of the Malay peninsula. However, after the British influence was established in Malaya and the Dutch colonial control reached into Sumatra, the two areas became formally separated and the intercourse between them steadily declined.

During the modern colonial period migrations of Sumatrans to Malay continued. However, in modern times there have been far more Javanese immigrants to Malaya than Sumatra. Thus, of the Malaysians who originally came from Indonesia, a far larger

proportion think of themselves as having come from Java than from Sumatra. This is particularly the case in Johore, where most Indonesian migrants have settled in recent years. At the same time, it is significant that most Malays who do not think of themselves as having migrated from Indonesia tend to look down on all recent arrivals, whether from Java or Sumatra. Since there are more recent migrants from Java there is generally a stronger feeling of prejudice against Javanese than Sumatrans.

C. Language

The difference in language between Sumatra and Malaya is not great. The Malay dialects spoken in Eastern Sumatra are not appreciably different from those found in the peninsula. However, the differences in dialect among the peoples of different parts of Sumatra are enough so that the Malaysians have little difficulty in recognizing them as being foreigners. Thus, the language of the Malay and the Sumatran are similar enough to serve as a constant reminder to both that they belong to different social groups. In fact, the degree of similarity and differences in language are about the same as that between social classes in Western Europe or America. Thus the Malay and the Sumatran can each be proud that his speech is different from the others.

#### D. Religion

The dominant religion in both Malaya and Sumatra is, of course, Islam. In both regions this religion has provided the basis for much of the popular culture. In recent years, however, Sumatrans have tended to take a somewhat more active interest in religion. Thus, on the one hand there have been a fairly large number of Sumatran converts to Christianity, while on the other hand it is among the West Sumatrans that one finds the most fanatical supporters of the prophet in all of Indonesia. In contrast, the Malays have generally had a more relaxed attitude toward their formal religion. The more educated Malays find the British approach toward religion an admirable one: religion is so important that the state should support it, and thus ordinary mortals need not worry about it.

In general it may be said that the Malays have a much more spirited interest in pre-Islamic religious concepts. The Malay generally has a great deal of respect for his medicine-man or pawang who is believed to be able to cast hexes, mix poisons, and destroy one's enemies in all kinds of ways that will baffle the best trained minds of Scotland Yard. In contrast, it may be said that the Sumatrans tend to have a less manipulative attitude toward their earlier religions. Sumatrans tend to be more awed by things magical, while the Malays are much quicker to explore the practical uses of magic.

### E. Attitudes Toward Each Other

The only period of separate colonial rule has given both the Malays and Sumatrans a sense of belonging to different societies and different nations. In spite of the weak bonds of nationalism within Indonesia, there has still been relatively little serious thought among Malaysians that the situations which existed before the colonial period should be restored. It is true that among certain Malay elements there has been talk of the eventual necessity for Malaya to join with Indonesia as a whole because of the problem of the Chinese in Malaya.

The desire for such a common state stems almost entirely from a fear of the Chinese within Malaya. To the extent that Malays have thought in terms of some eventual union with Indonesia, it has been mainly in terms of Java and not Sumatra. In the Malay mind it is the Javanese who is seen as a strong and capable ally against the Chinese, while the Sumatran is seen as less effective. Those politicians who have spoken of the possibilities of such a new state represent an extremist position, although some of them are to be found within the United Malay National Organization. The leading Malayan politicians, however, have been extremely hesitant even to suggest the possibility of expanding or changing the boundaries of the Malay state to include some part of Indonesia.

Had Indonesia had a more stable political history since independence, it is not inconceivable that a larger proportion of Malays would be showing interest in some kind of association with Indonesia. The basis for such a desire, however, would stem largely from (1) a feeling of insecurity toward the Chinese within Malaya, and (2) a desire to find strength from a vigorous Islamic leadership. A disunited and weak Indonesia is likely to have somewhat less appeal to Malays.

It is true that during the anti-Dutch demonstrations that followed the United Nations' vote on New Guinea, the Malays generally expressed a sympathy for the Indonesians at a time when the feelings of the British in Malaya were clearly with the Dutch. This reaction on the part of the Malays has been a rather diffuse general reaction toward their co-religionists and toward a people with whom they feel they have much in common. It has been specific enough, however, to center particularly upon the Sumatrans as contrasted to the Javanese. Any discussion of union with



Indonesia has been of such a general and vague nature that the different groups within Indonesia have never been singled out for special reference.

The attitude of the Sumatrans towards Malaya is somewhat more difficult to gauge. In the past there has been some tendency for the Sumatrans to look to Malaya for employment opportunities. This, however, has been the case only with laborers, since educated Sumatrans have generally been quite successful within their own country.

Thus we find that the tendency in the past has been for the Malaysians to look toward Indonesia for possible confederation for a larger state, while in contrast there has been very little interest on the part of Sumatrans to look toward Malaya for their political future. Among the Javanese there has been some talk of a larger Indonesian nation that would include parts of Malaya. This form of Indonesian nationalism has not been common to Sumatra. The current revolt of the commanders in Sumatra has not been based on strong ideological considerations that would call for the creation of a new and separate state or for identification with Malaya.

The Malayan government has adopted a policy of strict neutrality toward the conflict between Djakarta and Sumatra. If it were not for the issue of communism the Malayan government would probably support the central government of Indonesia if elements on Sumatra were to revolt. Thus the neutrality of the Malayan government is more a reflection of its strong anti-Communist position than of any sense of association with Sumatra.

**F. Some Notes on the Minangkabau**

The Minangkabau peoples originated in Sumatra where they are still one of the most important ethnic groupings. A large colony of them, however, moved to Negri Sembilan in Malaya during the sixteenth century. The origins of their name is of some interest at this time when the Sumatrans are in revolt against Javanese control. According to tradition at the time of the Javanese kingdom of Majapahit, the Javanese sent an expedition to conquer Western Sumatra. The Javanese suggested to the local people that instead of fighting a military engagement, they should permit two buffaloes to fight a duel, the winning buffalo to decide the ownership of the territory. The Minangkabaus took a young buffalo from its mother, starved it for milk for a couple of days, and then tied sharp knives on the brow where its horns have not as yet grown. The Javanese produced a large buffalo, and when the fight began the Minangkabaus' little buffalo rushed up to the old buffalo's belly in search of milk and its knives gashed its rivals flesh, forcing it to run away. The people were supposed to have shouted at this point *Menang Keraul! Menang Kerbau!* "Our buffalo wins." Hence the name Minangkabau.

The distinctive feature of the Minangkabau culture is that it originally was a matriarchy with respect to inheritance. A married man lived among his wife's people and could not himself inherit property. The Minangkabau also developed an extremely elaborate legal code known as the "*adat tertatah*." The code itself is a highly refined one, with an impressive number of explicitly defined categories for classifying types of civil and criminal actions.

Another distinctive feature of the Minangkabau culture was the great importance attached to many apparently democratic principles. For example, the local chiefs were all elected; important decisions required the expression of opinion of all within the group; and rich and poor, high-born and low-born were all treated equally before the law. The one almost fatal flaw, however, of the Minangkabau culture was their reliance on the principle of unanimity. It was essential within this system, for almost all decisions had to receive the unanimous consent of all involved. Often before decisions could be made, considerable bloodshed had to take place in order to achieve unanimity. The problem of insuring that elections would take place for the functionally important tribal chiefs without undue delay, because of the need for unanimity, was resolved by insisting that the new chief could have to be elected before the deceased chief could be buried.

The principle of unanimity was coupled with the idea that those in official positions should be provided with very little authority. In Minangkabau thinking, a man should be content with the honor and prestige of a post. To ask for power and authority is to display a mean and grasping personality. The Minangkabau ideal was to achieve honor and prestige without having to face any ugly problems of decision-making. Compared with most traditional cultures there was a great deal of confusion among the Minangkabau on matters of responsibility. The fundamental structure of the society was, of course, the patriarchal pattern of relationships; the formal offices, although vigorously contended over by the men, were of remarkably little consequence.

Another feature of Minangkabau culture has been its capacity to adapt to external influences, absorbing many qualities of other cultures while preserving its own fundamental principles. The Minangkabau accepted more from the early Hindu influence in Southeast Asia than most of the people of the region, even though their concepts of equality stood in basic contradiction to the fundamental Hindu concept of cast. Later, in spite of all that the prophet had to say about the inferior position of women, the Minangkabau accepted Islam with alacrity. This would have been more understandable if it had been accompanied by an assertion of authority on the part of men, but the patriarchy seems to have become even more firmly entrenched after the acceptance of Islam. In modern times, as we shall note, the Minangkabau had relatively conspicuous success in adjusting to the Western impact. In doing so, however, they have lost much of their dedication to patriarchal principles.

These cultural characteristics of the Minangkabau are well illustrated by the practices of the Minangkabau colonists in Malaya. In defining the role of their chief ruler or Yang-di-Petuan, they reflected their exposure to Indian culture by conceiving of him as one whose ancestors had been the incarnation of Hindu gods. In reference to their Islamic religion they thought of him in the shadow of Allah on earth. But because of their own traditions they gave him no authority: he could collect no taxes except fees at cock fights. He was expected to live on his wife's inheritance. The Yang-di-Petuan was in the awkward position of being the supreme arbiter and judge only if the territorial chiefs invited him to adjudicate--but they never did. He was also conceived of as the caliph or head of the Moslem theocracy in any territory where the local chief did not claim the title

for himself--which he always did. Theoretically he presided over a State Council--but this body almost never met because the prospects for unanimity were usually so dim.

It is striking that the Minangkabau both in Malaya and in Sumatra have been generally recognized as one of the more vigorous people, and that in both areas a disproportionate number of them have followed careers in the civil service and within the military. An extremely high proportion of the national leaders of Indonesia are from Minangkabau. Dr. Hatta was born in Bukit Tinggi; and H. J. N. Sjahrir, the leader of the socialists, and Natsir, the leader of the Masjumi, are also from the Padang area of Sumatra.

Various hypotheses can be advanced as to why the Minangkabau have shown such comparative success in more westernized pursuits. Possibly their experience with this traditional elaborate legal code has given them a greater sense for the importance and the relevance of legal structures. This tradition may have made them more skilled in thinking in abstract and impersonal terms. There is also some suggestion that the matriarchal system has driven the Minangkabau male out of agriculture and away from concerns with the maintenance of lands which belong to the women. Thus the male is often more prepared to follow careers carrying him into the civil service and military establishments. It has also been suggested that the somewhat less pampering of the male child among the Minangkabau as compared with most Malay and Indonesian culture practices has led to a more self-reliant individual. Whatever the value of these hypotheses, it is clear that products of Minangkabau culture have generally adapted somewhat more readily to the demands of modern life than the other Indonesians or Malays.